

News Release



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In Memoriam: Ronald Reagan

Reagan Credited as State Railroad Museum Catalyst; State Parks to Honor Memory with Free Admission

SACRAMENTO – To acknowledge his love of railroads and his support for what is today the California State Railroad Museum, California State Parks will honor the memory of President Ronald Reagan on Friday, June 11, 2004, by offering free admission to the Museum and a rare opportunity to tour a private railroad car, the *Gold Coast*, used by President Reagan.

It was aboard the *Gold Coast* that then-Gov. Reagan and his wife, Nancy, dined in 1970 and in the process had a taste of things to come in Sacramento. This opulent private railroad car is displayed at the Museum, but is not normally open to the public.

“Ronald Reagan would be proud of what has become North America’s finest and most-visited interpretive railroad museum,” said California State Parks Director Ruth Coleman. “The California State Railroad Museum, operated by California State Parks on behalf of the people of this great state, owes a great debt to Governor, and President, Ronald Reagan.”

BACKGROUND

On the eve of the Transcontinental Railroad’s centennial, then-Governor Reagan participated in groundbreaking ceremonies in late April 1969 for the Old Sacramento State Historic Park and the reconstruction of the Big Four Building. Today, this building houses the California State Railroad Museum’s General Offices, Museum Library Reading Room, and the Huntington & Hopkins Hardware Store.

The groundbreaking served as a catalyst for the rebirth of Old Sacramento, which at the time was a seedy “skid row” area instead of today’s tourist Mecca. That same day, an article in the Sacramento Bee announced a temporary home had been found “courtesy of Safeway stores for one of the finest railroad collections in the world, destined to become ‘Exhibit A’ in a railroad museum pegged for Old Sacramento.”

“Many of you youngsters have never had a train ride,” commented Reagan that day to the numerous children in attendance. “I’m happy I had a chance to criss-cross this country

many times by train. I became conscious of its size by looking through a train window. You won't get the same reality from 40,000 feet up in the air. I strongly recommend to all of you—try it. You'll love it.”

California's governor clearly was a railroad fan. In addition to his love for riding trains, his home in East Sacramento featured a “toy train room” where he often entertained guests, including legislators. Governor Reagan early on demonstrated a commitment to State Parks and the preservation of California's heritage. Soon his support for a much broader means of communicating this enthusiasm for trains and history would become possible. For now, however, the concept of a railroad museum in Old Sacramento remained only a dream.

A little over a year later the Reagans were invited to a cocktail reception and dinner in Old Sacramento, at an unlikely location on the railroad tracks along Front Street. Dr. Denny Anspach, a Sacramento physician who also served as chairman of the Sacramento Trust for Historic Preservation (newly formed to advance the cause of a railroad museum), was the Reagans' host. Also part of the dinner crowd was William Penn Mott, director of California State Parks. Mott later served as director of the National Parks Service under President Reagan.

As the guests were finishing cocktails in a Southern Pacific lounge car, a whistle echoed in the distance. The Southern Pacific's very first locomotive, the 1863 *C. P. Huntington*—today the symbol of the Railroad Museum—“steamed” in on an adjacent track, pushed by an SP diesel. It was a symbolic arrival. The guests then stepped aboard the *Gold Coast* for a memorable dinner.

“That dinner,” noted Dr. Anspach, “went flawlessly. Governor Reagan was quite the conversationalist, and talk flowed easily. The Southern Pacific Railroad catered the dinner right off a dining car parked adjacent, and cocktails were served aboard one of the railroad's lounge cars. Today, both of these cars are in the Museum's collection. Dinner was served not just by waiters, but by one of the railroad's elite crews of servers. It was an event, really, filled with showmanship—something which I think the Reagans appreciated.”

Engaged by the possibilities, Reagan allowed his imagination to freely explore the concept of a state railroad museum sited in California's Capital City. This was not a new idea; the dream had been drifting about since the late 1930s, when a group of railroad enthusiasts first began collecting historic railroad locomotives and cars for eventual public display.

“Without the active support of Reagan,” mused Walter P. Gray, who served as the first Director of the Railroad Museum and today oversees cultural resources within the California State Park system, “the concept of a railroad museum likely would not have come about.”

Although certainly other forces were at work during this period, forces which could have either helped or hindered the museum concept, clearly Governor Reagan became a supporter. Within a year, when appropriations to advance the Railroad Museum were included in the State Budget, Reagan circled the appropriations—instead of giving them the famous “blue-line veto” that he had become known for in his efforts to contain “big government.” A master plan for Old

Sacramento State Historic Park and the Museum was created, a plan that even today is guiding the Museum as it expands into the former Southern Pacific Railyards in downtown Sacramento.

The Museum's first facility, the Central Pacific Railroad Passenger Station, opened on Front Street in 1976. A popular success, it immediately became the leading attraction in Old Sacramento. Later that same year, planning began in earnest for the 100,000 square foot Railroad History Museum, which was just beginning construction two years later when voters passed Proposition 13. Amid great fanfare and an event known as "Railfair Sacramento 1981," the Railroad History Museum debuted in May 1981—eleven years after that special dinner with the Reagans aboard the *Gold Coast*.

The Museum is operated by California State Parks with financial assistance from the nonprofit California State Railroad Museum Foundation. It is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. except Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day.

The complex of facilities includes the well-known Railroad History Museum, plus the reconstructed Central Pacific Railroad Passenger Station and Freight Depot, 1849 Eagle Theatre, and Big Four and Dingley Spice Mill buildings in Old Sacramento.

For 24-hour information, please visit www.californiastaterailroadmuseum.org or telephone (916) 445-6645.

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